

**BETWEEN SPACE AND EVOCATION:  
A PORTFOLIO OF ACOUSMATIC COMPOSITIONS**

**by**

**MANFREDI CLEMENTE**

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The University of Birmingham  
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## ABSTRACT

This portfolio comprises a selection of 7 compositions of *musique concrète* and aims to give a precise idea of my personal approach to composition and sound. Three of the pieces presented, *Il habite partout*, *Les dimensions du réel* and *La boucle*, together constitute a cycle entitled *La forme du paradoxe*. The last work taken into account is *Buifiazioni per Rimbaud* and is based on a text written specifically for me by Dario Enea, Italian playwright and actor.

This commentary consists of an attempt to discuss the problems raised by the way I approach composition and sound in general. My argument is based on the definition I give of the key concepts of *space*, *sound image* and *evocation*, mainly through the means of an aesthetic reflection that tries to stay faithful to the basic rules of phenomenological method. In this context, space is not meant in its locative sense, rather it is defined as the process of exploration of the sound image that characterizes the act of listening. The sound image is thence discussed in its spatial aspects. It is described as an object defined by a frame (both conceptual and empirical) and an inside, which is explored by the listener. It is this exploration that allows the listener to reach a moment of resonance with the sound image itself, moment that I defined as evocation. The consideration of the sound image in a spatial sense allows me to introduce the idea of meta-space, a term that aims at describing the way in which the sound images enter into a mutual relationship in the context of a musical composition.

In the second part of this commentary I explain what I have done in my works, with constant references to the definitions given in the first chapter and to the way I imagined for applying

them to composition. The why and how I tried to experiment with form and the articulation of sound material are richly discussed. The pieces are described in a chronological order, so to allow the reader to understand the evolution of specific techniques of elaboration and organization of sound images and meta-space throughout the portfolio.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **LIST OF COMPOSITIONS INCLUDED IN THE PORTFOLIO<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Inexorabilia</b>	6:20
<b>Nella notte</b>	2:54
<b>La forme du paradoxe:</b>	
- Il habite partout	6:30
- Les dimensions du réel - Vol. I	9:30
- Les dimensions du réel - Interludio	0:37
- Les dimensions du réel - Vol. II	8:50
- La boucle	11:10
<b>Distante, sospeso...</b>	16:25
<b>Buificazioni per Rimbaud</b>	29:32

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<sup>1</sup> All of them can be found in the attached DVD.



## PREFACE

When I arrived in Birmingham to begin my MPhil in Music, my research focus was not unlike that of many other researchers and composers who tried to explore space as a significant parameter of acousmatic music. I was interested in spatialization as a primary component of both the composition and the interpretation of fixed music; my proposal centred on that and was very much focused on non-standard multichannel audio formats and the projection of sound on acousmonia.

It did not take me long to understand that I was confusing *spatialization* with *space*, and was thus using the two terms as synonyms. Yet they are not the same. In order to explore this difference, I started from scratch, abandoning the original project and focusing on the concept of space in music. However, in doing so, I was in danger of approaching the topic in a purely theoretical, Cartesian-like way, rather than keeping my research closer to my main interests: sound and composition. Therefore, my exploration needed to be rooted in my music. What I was aiming for was a natural evolution towards the development of a personal poetic approach, not a change of subject – from composition to musicology or philosophy.

Nowadays I could say that the theoretical and philosophical framework that gives context to my work is the result of an asynchronous exploration of my pieces of music. I spent a considerable amount of time trying to understand retrospectively what I had done in my compositions and why I had chosen that way, not another. The outcome of this sort of exploration of my mirrored self has often been just a partial answer. Nonetheless it has

always had the wonderful role of being a trigger for further experimentation with sound. Inside that acoustically treated bunker we call the studio, metaphor of a far greater isolation, I think I entered a loop of practice and theory where each of the two terms was both originated and originating, coming to the world and giving birth. In a certain way, because of this loop, I could say that for more than three years I have repeatedly tried to compose the same piece of music: it was always there, a short distance away from me, yet absolutely unreachable. Every work included in the portfolio is, at the same time, outcome and trigger of a line of reasoning that I am still following, from which I obtained just a few answers and that raised many new questions. Throughout these years I have desired both to reach the end of that line and its eternal prolongation – could I be without it?

## INTRODUCTION

This Commentary is a guide to my portfolio of electroacoustic compositions and aims at giving a clearer context to my musical practice. The collection of works submitted comprises compositions of *musique concrète*, composed between Birmingham Electroacoustic Music Studios and my own studio in Palermo.

The reader might be surprised by the fact that many of the references in certain paragraphs of this writing, particularly in the first chapter, are to publications outside the field of music. In a society so concerned with specialization in a field and so used to the superiority of applied knowledge, it can appear at least strange, if not incorrect, to be guided through a portfolio of compositions by philosophers and writers whose language can occasionally turn out to be obscure and poetic. The writing will not be lacking field-specific references but it is useful to underline, at the very start, the way I see this Commentary to be related to my music.

Speaking about art and space, with a particular reference to sculpture, Martin Heidegger (2010: pp.19-21) noticed that the artist unavoidably realises a confrontation with space, yet is not able to say what space is and what “confrontation with space” actually means – in precisely the same way in which a physics experiment is unable to say anything about what Physics is. In other words, it is in the nature of art itself to deal with certain basic ‘materials’ of existence that are objects of other disciplines too (e.g. philosophy); yet the interaction is so direct and natural that no definition of those materials can be derived from within the interaction itself. This is to say that it is impossible to define something from within that

something itself. When we write about music, we are required to jump out of music, i.e. we need to resort to languages and expressive modes that do not belong to music.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the above-mentioned categories of apparently anomalous sources are functional to that shift, answering to the need of approaching and treating certain issues from different perspectives. One could say that this submission is made up of two elements related to each other like parallel lines, or better, parallel mirrors: on one side, the Commentary, including the theoretical discussion of space and the perception of sound images, representing the speculative outcome of the objectification of my work; on the other side, the portfolio i.e. the work itself, the interaction, the realized confrontation with sound and space.

The majority of this Commentary is focused on fixed-medium compositions and, as I did above, I will refer to them as *concrete*<sup>3</sup> rather than *acousmatic* works. Because of its purpose, I do not consider this text the right place to discuss in detail the reasons why I have taken this decision – such a thing would transform it into a dissertation about Schaeffer's theory and its historical evolution. Nevertheless, this introduction gives me the opportunity to make a concise compendium of the main arguments that led me to use one expression instead of the other.

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<sup>2</sup> I think that, speaking about music, we move from the domain of *sense* to the one of *meaning*. Saying so, I am implying that *sense* is a general state of awareness and/or perception of a certain fact, either internal or external to the subject; on the other side, I use the word *meaning* to indicate signification, i.e. designation in a linguistic way. For a deeper discussion of the topic see ¶1.5, *The concept of evocation*, p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the commentary I will use the English and French version of the adjective interchangeably.

*Musique concrète* is a formula coined to refer to a precise aesthetic approach to sound and composition, while the term *acousmatic*, maybe more fascinating and esoteric, just refers to a mode of listening that is common to any kind of audio recording, where the cause is not visibly present to the listener. Nowadays the original French expression often seems to be used in academia to refer to musical production of a precise historical period, the 1950s in France (Chion, 2009: p.115). Yet the basic ‘rules’ of this music genre as expressed by Michel Chion (ibid: pp.24-30) are absolutely the same as those of acousmatic music, discussed by Bayle (1993) and Harrison (1999), among others. Therefore, it seems to me that the distinction does not exist. If there is any such distinction, it is related to the direct influence of Pierre Schaeffer and the problematic idea of *reduced listening* presented in his *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966: pp. 270-272) that was transformed or strongly criticized in the following years (e.g. Bayle, 1993; Chion, 2010; Emmerson, 1986). Brian Kane (2014) probably presented one of the best critiques of Schaeffer’s theory, in which he offers a careful comparison between the French researcher/composer’s ideas and Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological method. While attacking many of Schaeffer’s considerations about the ontology of sound, throughout his entire book Kane retains the original French expression and does not renounce it. I also disagree with Schaeffer in many ways (as will be clear in the first chapter of this text), whilst at the same time recognizing his historical role and the continuing validity of the expression *musique concrète*, which indicates an approach to composition that allows musical structure and rules to be derived from the composer’s relationship with the phenomenon of ‘sound’. This is the idea that permeates my whole view of composition and music, an idea that I have tried to make as evident as possible throughout this whole text.

My research falls into two complementary parts, one theoretical and the other practical. On the one hand I have tried to develop a sort of personal theory of perception, in which the concept of space (although not in the common meaning of the word) plays a central role; on the other, I have applied certain principles of that theory to my compositions. The main objective was the possible evolution of the phenomenological approach to sound with a strong reference to the field of studies that Michel Chion called ‘*acoulogie*’ (Chion: 2010), as well as the development of a personal compositional style able to consciously take into account the multiple potential of the sound image.

The Commentary begins with an overview of the most philosophical aspects of my research, aimed at clarifying what I mean by the term *space* and how I see it as a constant on-going process of redefining of the self and its surroundings, rather than a reference system or a compositional parameter. A key term in my argument is *image* (and *sound image* as one of its subcategories), which I use in the wide sense of a *frame-inside* (or *frame-content*) relationship, and is consequently presented and considered as an object provided with spatial characteristics. The context given by the clarification of these basic concepts allows the following exploration of the idea of *evocation* as a main aspect of the esthetic process involved in listening (i.e. listening to *music*), based itself on the idea of image as presented above. Thereafter I compare my view of evocative processes to an apparently analogous concept, *mimesis*, in order to underline differences and similarities and to explain why the first term is in my view more suitable for my view of music. The first chapter is closed by a brief discussion on the concept of listening as a substantially spatial experience deployed in time and the presentation of the idea of *meta-space*.



The ideas and vocabulary introduced in the first chapter will help me to explain decisions I have taken in the compositions included in my portfolio, which are discussed in detail in the second chapter of the Commentary. I will present them one by one in a chronological order starting from the very first piece I composed after arriving in Birmingham, *Inexorabilia*. This will give me the opportunity to underline the evolution of my approach and the level of my own comprehension of my practice. Moreover, I hope to clarify the decisive role that the time spent in studio has had in order to develop a personal theoretical framework (i.e. how practice has influenced theory and vice-versa) and to discuss at a deeper level the specific formal and technical issue I focused on during my years of research.

**Chapter I**  
**ON SPACE AND EVOCATION**



Noël Arnaud, *L'état d'ébauche*

## 1.1 An empty space

I would like to start this writing with an experiment: trying to imagine an empty space, to depict something that is lacking any character, any appearance or perspective. Void denies shape, any colour nuance or consistency. There are no objects, either physical or mental. In fact, I am trying to create an object that is just lacking, refusing or denying anything that makes of it an object. Trying to create a totally negative object, I simply fail. Yet emptiness is a well-known concept: we all have a precise idea of what an empty room can look like, we all know the utility of a blank page... Why I am I not able to get there?

What is needed in order to define emptiness is a *defined boundary*. If I do not have a stated limit, I have nothing to explore in order to define it. In fact *demarking* is the first step to imagine a generic space. In other words, it could be said that, even when the purpose is to get an abstract mental picture of space, what is needed is a reference system. It does not matter if it is the actual limit of a page, therefore a physical boundary, or an abstract system of coordinates made up of lines that meet each other in an 'origin'. In any case I need it. I need to root it in something, echoing the same way in which, in the real world, I am rooted in my body and senses.

## 1.2 Defining space

Once I start demarking a zone, it is not yet clear what I am obtaining through this mental act. Space for sure, but what *space* is and means is not automatically established. It is not just chance that the attempts to define space as a key to understanding human relationships with

the physical world start in the seventeenth century with modern philosophy and science, when older models are undermined by new discoveries. René Descartes proposed the equivalence between matter and space (Reale and Antiseri, 2011b: pp.104-106), seeing *extension* as the only irreducible and unquestionable aspect of matter – a perfect counterpart to his *cogito* (Cartesio, 1636: p.84). Sir Isaac Newton introduced instead the idea of an *absolute space* existing beyond our relative perception of motion and time (Hatfield, 2006: p.64), whilst Leibniz supported the idea of a phenomenal and relational space (ibid: p.65). These three positions give an idea of the variety of philosophers’ answers to the question ‘what is space?’.

When Immanuel Kant – whose critical philosophy has the purpose of opposing both empiricism and dogmatic rationalism (Deleuze, 2009: p.1) – decides to propose his own view of the problem, he does it in an extremely interesting and revolutionary way. First of all, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the German philosopher re-thinks the relationship between the subject and the object of perception, stating that the subject does not discover the object’s rules through knowledge; on the contrary, it is the object that conforms to the subject’s rules when it is known (Reale and Antiseri, 2011c: p.543). When Kant then arrives at his *transcendental aesthetic* (Kant, 1781: pp.53-75), the pages in which he analyses the concepts of space and time, space is considered precisely as one of those rules of the subject to which the objects of intuition<sup>4</sup> conform. Space is in his view an *a priori* representation that acts as the foundation of any external intuition (ibid: p.56). In other words, space is a structure of the subject’s intellect, a sort of empty container, and the objects of sensory knowledge, i.e. the physical world, fill this container adapting to its shape. Therefore, in Kant’s view, the basic

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<sup>4</sup> Intuition (*Anschauung*) is in Kant the immediate knowledge of objects. As it is immediate, intuition does not need reason to operate. On the contrary, reason accesses objects through intuition (Kant, 2000: p.53).

notions of orientation are already in the subject: it is on the basis of these notions objects of intuition are placed up, down, in front or behind and so on.

Kant strongly influenced romantic and contemporary philosophy. In fact, as underlined by Landes (2015: p.335), it is not hard to read Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2009) as an attempt to re-write Kant's critical philosophy in the new light of phenomenological method. The French phenomenologist dedicates a long chapter of his work to space, trying to understand what it is and what it represents. Here he gives his own answer, which is also based on actual experiments on space perception (ibid: pp.327-330 and 332-334), supposing the existence of an original *spatial level* of the subject, i.e. of a sort of substratum of the subject's concept of space that is prior to reason. This original spatial level can change or evolve if the conditions in which the body (the real centre of Merleau-Ponty's analysis) is placed change (ibid: p.333). Merleau-Ponty rejects an approach to space based on a distinction between subject and object in which just one of the two terms comes to have a founding role (the classic dualism of modern philosophy), proposing instead his idea of the subject as *being-in-the-world* [être-au-monde]. Whilst Kant states that space is a means of knowledge that has its place inside the subject, Merleau-Ponty underlines, on the base of experimental evidences, the ability we have to radically subvert the common perception and idea of space, building up further spatial levels as a response to the change of conditions we experience. As we cannot isolate the subject from its body and perception is always perception *of* something, our mental 'structure' is not fixed and always identical to itself: it exists and evolves in relation to reality, to the world in which our body is rooted. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the spatial level as something primordial and preceding reason but able to evolve in relation to empirical conditions and stimuli, opens up a new way of considering

space as something that does not necessarily exist either outside or inside us. Space is relational not in the sense of a relationship in-between external objects; rather it is a function of the relationship existing between a subject that is in the world and the world itself of which it is an organ.

Agreeing with the idea proposed by Merleau-Ponty that the subject is always a *being-in-the-world* whose spatial levels are in constant evolution, I propose the idea that space is nothing but *the process of exploration* of what is perceived. This is equivalent to saying that, on the one hand, space is a function of the relationship between the subject and the world (i.e. it exists purely *in* the relation with the world and depends on an individual's *grasp* of the world) and on the other, that it is an on-going exploration and synthesis, never interrupted, always instinctive and immediate, always pre-rational. It can be observed that the processual vision of space is already present in many of the definitions given in the previous pages (for example, the Kantian 'empty box' does not make sense without being filled by actual phenomena, i.e. without constantly meeting them) and perfectly resonates with Martin Heidegger's statement that 'space clears space' (2010: p.30),<sup>5</sup> giving as the only possible definition of space a verb, an on-going action. The process of space does not exist outside the unavoidable relationship with the world and it cannot be interrupted, as it is a basic, foundational function of perception. We constantly explore our surroundings and operate a synthesis of the perceived, a collage of multiple states of perception and consciousness.

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<sup>5</sup> In the original German text: *Raum räumt*. The verb used by Heidegger originally means 'making room' in the sense of 'clearing out' or 'vacating' space. I decided to translate it as 'space clears space' to maintain the assonance of the original text.

### 1.3 The concept of image

As stated before, we need to distinguish space from the reference system used to grasp it. If space is admitted as an on-going process, we need a context for it to take place. I need now to return to that reference system, to the pre-established boundaries, in order to examine it in greater depth. Once again I go back to the experiment with which I opened the commentary just to underline that those boundaries I need correspond to the limits of my blank sheet or to the walls of an imaginary room. They assume the same role as the frame of a picture that delimits the field my senses plumb. In fact, in posing my reference system, I establish a *frame-inside relationship* that works as the context of the process of exploration, which I previously defined as ‘space’ (and the object of which was still vague in the previous paragraph).<sup>6</sup> Hence, I propose to give the name *image* to that object which is made up of this relationship between a frame and its content.

In this context, the concept of image needs to be seen in a wider and probably more abstract way than we normally do. With regard to this, it is useful to underline that the etymology of the word suggests itself a wider sense of the term that has been partially lost in everyday language. The *Illustrated Dictionary of the Latin Language* [Dizionario illustrato della lingua latina] (1988) gives *mask* or *portrait* (therefore something related to visual representation of a subject) as the first meaning of the Latin word *imago*, whilst the others are in order: *echo*, *shadow* or *shade*, *thought* or *memory*, and *vision* or *dream*. As it is evident from these translations, *image* is anything that can be considered as a relatively incorporeal

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<sup>6</sup> From now on I will refer to space as the process of exploration of what is perceived simply as ‘the process space’.



representation of a given object and whose contour barely recalls, as in the case of a shadow, the object itself. Of course, it could seem that, defining it as a generic frame-inside relation, I am trying to take a further step in the level of abstraction of the term. Nonetheless I think that the word perfectly fits my goals, giving the idea of a delimited area (if we refer to today's more common meaning of the term, predominantly related to sight) whilst maintaining a general sense of abstraction that can recall its own etymology, and whose relations with my ideas I will clarify in the next paragraphs.

It is particularly interesting to notice that the second translation of the original *imago* is *echo*, a partial and slightly distorted reproduction of an original sound due to the reflections of the source on a flat surface. In fact, echo can be considered as a primordial form of *sound image*, a concept introduced by François Bayle (1993: pp. 93-100) in order to define a conceptual evolution of Schaeffer's *object sonore*. Bayle defines the sound image or *i-son* as the sonic equivalent of a picture, underlining how it is disjointed from the original source on two levels: the physical one, due to the removal of the original cause of the sound; the psychological one, as it acts for the listener as simulacrum, interpretation or sign (Ibid: p.186). In my view these two elements of disjunction emphasised by Bayle already in his first definition of the *i-son* represent a perfect example of abstract levels of framing; the result is an object which then becomes spatial – i.e. which is explored by the listener whilst acting as the context for the process space.

The comparison of audio recording with photography could appear banal but it is not: both techniques allow the isolation of a portion of reality from the continuum of perception. The

microphone acts on the *auditum*<sup>7</sup> cutting out a portion of it. The cut is operated with the consciousness that it will never be a faithful reproduction of that portion, but that the tool is in fact creating a new object. As Marchetti declares:

*‘Recording a sound ... is to make the sound alive another time, autonomous, and not considering it as a unique replica’*<sup>8</sup>

(2008: p.15)

When a sound is recorded, several well-known limitations of the audio chain characterize the new object created (microphone characteristics, such as polar pattern, colouration, background noise and sensitivity, and the acoustic field in which the original sound exists, are just a few of them). All together they establish a recognizable frame – this time with an evident empirical character – that defines the whole articulation of the new object. This physical frame overlaps with and reinforces the abstract and psychological one already created by the disjunction from the original source. Hence, if the audio chain allows the creation of a new frame-inside relationship, this means that it is possible to consider that relationship as an image, i.e. a spatial object amenable to exploration. It is precisely on this spatial object and on its exploration that the composer of *musique concrète* bases his or her work. Such a view of the recording process – what Marchetti calls *tournage* (i.e. filming or

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Chion (2010: p.205) defines the *auditum* as ‘sound considered just as perceived sound, without possible confusion with the actual source...nor with those vibrational phenomena that are the subject of acoustics’. Trans. Manfredi Clemente.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Enregistrer un son...C’est rendre le son une nouvelle fois vivant, autonome et non pas le considérer comme unique réplique’. Trans: M. Clemente.

shooting) in order to underline again a similarity with the analogous process in the visual domain (ibid.) – allows the composer to exploit any kind of image to reach his expressive goals. Ideally, there should be no value distinction, from the composer's point of view, between low-fi and hi-fi images, because both carry with them a peculiar interpretation of the original sound and present a different object to the listener. A perfect example of this is the use of what should be considered lo-fi recordings of reciting voice in Michel Chion's *Prisonnier du Son* (1995). Here the given frame, made of distortions and Larsen effects, depicts a human character trapped inside sound and emerging from it. At the same time, Denis Smalley's *Empty Vessels* (2000) presents to the listener with recordings of his garden's soundscape, but all of them are filtered through vessels that act as resonating chambers, giving to the listener a very evident reference frame.

#### **1.4 Exploring the sound image: inner and outer space**

In his paper titled *Space-form and the acousmatic image*, Denis Smalley (2007) starts his discussion with a description of what could be called an absolutely peaceful sound image. He covers it fully, exploring every single direction and axis, discovering the most hidden planes and depths the image can offer. His description is so detailed and his writing so effective that the reader can depict in his mind a corresponding vision. Basing part of his analysis on Henri Lefebvre's propositions, Smalley recognizes that 'source-causes produce space' (ibid: p.38), deploying energy in space (here meant in the common locative sense). It is impossible for me to agree with Smalley on this position, mainly because, as discussed earlier, space is for me something different from the sum of the dimensions of the surrounding world. What I called space is a process of exploration; thus it is subordinated to a subject-object relationship, not to

one of the two terms alone. At the same time, the concept of space as deployed energy, borrowed and developed by Smalley, is particularly interesting and deserves attention, as it already suggests that an ongoing action lies behind the more common idea of space as a static area surrounding us. George Perec, in his wonderful *Species of spaces* writes:

*'Our gaze travels through space and gives us the illusion of relief and distance. That is how we construct space, with an up and a down, a left and a right, an in front and a behind, a near and a far.'*

(1999: p.81)

More than Smalley, Perec underlines how the intention of the subject in the process of exploration is of fundamental importance. The directions that we use to 'construct space' to which he refers are in fact fundamental for our experience and need to be included in the process space as a key aspect of it. I see them as *vectors* or directional forces implied by the process, therefore as energy deployment. But this energy deployment is not in the object of exploration, as Smalley seems to suggest; it is not in that space which surrounds a sort of passive subject. Rather it is the engine behind the intentional tension of the subject towards the object, a propelling force which can find its own sense just in the relationship with the object itself.

The image is the context of the process space, which takes place thanks to the directional forces underlined above. It is important though to point out that these forces cannot just limit themselves to the boundaries of a single frame. Like Kant's *a priori* representation they are proper to the subject and act as engines that constantly connect images between them giving a

coherent perception of the body and its surroundings. If not, the obvious consequence would be a total immobility, a subject that gets lost in a static context, always identical to itself. Hence, we put together images creating connections whose main foundation is *memory*. On this basis, we force the given boundaries and get a general view useful for orientation and ensuring consciousness of the surroundings. Generally speaking, there exists a strong relationship between the process space – i.e. the exploration of the image – and memory, which acts as a bridge between different times of the exploration itself. Acousmatic composers among others have discovered that the relation between sound images and memory is far more complex than it might initially appear. Actually, the whole concept of *reduced listening* as presented by Pierre Schaeffer (1966: pp. 270-272) has been criticized on the basis of what is considered an unavoidable reconnection of sound images (that are equivalents of Schaeffer's *sound objects*) to memories that the listener poses as imaginary sources for the perceived sound. As an example, François Bayle's *i-son* adds to Schaeffer's *sound object* a complex semiotic construction (Bayle, 1993: pp.54-63) that considers sound images as signs (with evident consequences on what they represent for the listener). Moreover, the substitution of actual sources with imaginary ones is prominent in Michel Chion's list of 'commandments' of *musique concrète* (2009: p.29) not just as a natural tendency of the listener presented with acousmatic sounds, but as one of the obvious purposes of this musical genre.

It would be extremely difficult to describe fully how memory and the related psychological processes work – it is in fact one of the most important research topics of the neurosciences and would lead me completely beyond my own topic. Nonetheless, I think that at least a similarity can be established between the concept of memory and the one of image as

expressed above<sup>9</sup>. In a way, it is possible to consider memories as framed cuts from the entirety of an individual's experience. In my own experience, even when a prolonged action is captured in them, memories are often a paradoxical combination of the dynamism of that inscribed action and a sort of ideal immobility, i.e. a suspended atmosphere that places the action outside the boundaries of our time-related world. Because of this suspension, they are amenable to exploration: precisely like images (and thus, like sound images too) they become spatial objects. This immobility could be due to the vagueness of the memory itself, or perhaps to the process of idealization that transforms it into something different from what actually happened or has been experienced – sometimes into iterative actions that depict an atmosphere more than a 'something'. What is for sure is that we can recall these 'stored images' and, by exploring them, re-experience them in the new light of our present. Of course this 're-experience' does not correspond to the original fact or action, rather to the way we felt (or think we felt), or the way and the reasons why we have been impressed by it and it has stayed with us.

Recalling a memory is something that happens constantly in more or less conscious and evident ways, depending on the situation. When we listen to a sound image, this acts as a trigger for the process of recalling – a process that, as I said above, is well known to composers of *musique concrète*. The use of sound images is a sophisticated game that

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<sup>9</sup> I need to underline that it is almost unavoidable for me, in this paragraph, to refer to my own experience and therefore to what memory is for me. Although it may not seem particularly rigorous, it must also be noticed that I am not trying to establish an absolute and coherent theory of sound image or of psychological processes related to the experience of it. I am rather focusing the context of my compositional work, therefore including several personal statements and considerations in the discourse.

establishes an equilibrium between a space that is external to the subject – the exploration of the object – and one that is internal to him or her, totally private and personal. When we explore an image, we unavoidably refer to a personal baggage of inner images that let us connect that unknown perceived object to a set of well-known ones, in an infinite process of re-connection that is comparable to the infinity of Peirce's semiotic triangle (Chandler, 2007: p.31). When the sound image is in a constructed context, such as a composition, a musical work, the process of recalling is not just a purely semiotic reference to other signs or objects, a designative process; in that context, images do not just stand for something else, but acquire a poetic value – more than recall facts, they evoke states; and the key to accessing them is the resonance between an inside and an outside that exchange their defined roles. As Jean-Luc Nancy says:

*To be listening is to be at the same time outside and inside, to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other. Listening thus forms the perceptible singularity that bears in the most ostensive way the perceptible or sensitive (aesthetic) condition as such: the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion. 'Here, time becomes space,' is sung in Wagner's Parsifal.*

(2007: p.14)

## **1.5 The concept of evocation**

*Evocation* is a word that I often used to describe my experience of certain sounds or compositions that I considered particularly interesting or important for me - François Bayle's *Erosphère* (2012), Lionel Marchetti's *Equus* (2009), Michel Chion's *Requiem* (1993) are just

a few of them. The word originally expresses the idea of recalling something to the conscious mind and is flavoured by a consistent aroma of religious mysticism that derives from the rituals of invoking a god or spirit. The more I used this word, the more I became aware of the meaning it had for me, in the context of my own work. In fact, I can say now that I use it to refer to that moment of resonance between inner and outer space/images that I described in the previous paragraph, that moment in which the process of exploration of an external image (e.g. a sound image) and an internal one (e.g. a memory) coincide. In my view, the word evocation stands for the complex of the processes of linking what we hear with what we are, with the totality of our selves. The vagueness by which the term is characterized is, I think, particularly well suited to music, an art that because of its level of abstraction hardly *designates* objects – a faculty that is proper to linguistic processes – but rather communicates with the listener on another level, the one of a general state of consciousness or awareness that I call *sense*. As Deleuze says ‘sense is what is expressed in a proposition’ (2005: p.25), a fourth<sup>10</sup> dimension of the proposition itself that exists as a result of the totality of semiotic processes, an entity that is ‘incorporeal, complex, irreducible, that is at the surface of things, a pure event which inheres or subsists in the proposition’ (Ibid.). It does and does not exist at the same time, as it belongs to the individual and his or her beliefs more than to a field of shared and objectified entities.

Because of the strong presence of images cut from often-well-known everyday experiences, *musique concrète* could appear more ‘designative’ than instrumental composition – in the end, what we hear can appear as the ‘reproduction’ of certain facts, a direct reference to an object

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<sup>10</sup> The other dimensions are: *designation*, *manifestation* and *signification* (Deleuze, 2005: p.19-20), equivalents to the three terms of Peirce’s semiotics.



and therefore a pure semiotic sign. Nonetheless, the ambiguity that the acousmatic condition proposes to the listener is well known, as is the extreme interpretational relativity that characterizes the perception of *musique concrète* and of the complex overlapping of sound images of which it is made – what could be called the *meta-space* of the composition. As in every form of art, it is possible to find two levels of articulation that co-exist: on the one hand, the *discourse*, on the other the *sense*. When Simon Emmerson introduced (1986, pp. 17-18) and then refined (2007, p.14) the idea of a relationship between *aural* and *mimetic* discourse in electroacoustic music, he addressed the need to establish a framework for the comprehension of the articulation of discourse in contemporary music. In fact, the dichotomy he proposes establishes a relationship between the grammar-like structure that is proper to traditional harmony and the ‘new’ use of recorded material proposed by contemporary music and especially by the concrete repertoire. The concept of *mimesis* (a term that originally means *imitation*) refers to the referential character of sound images, to that unavoidable construction of imaginary sources/causes in the mind of the listener. Nonetheless, the term seems to underline – also because of its etymology – a movement towards an ‘outside’ of the relationship between the subject and the object of listening; i.e. it seems to underline a directionality of listening that leads to the actual world, to actual landscapes and objects, by the means of sound-replicas of that world. On the contrary, the term evocation is in my view more suitable for describing that complex process of recalling that rather than being just mimetic, appears as a complex balance of mimetic and methexic<sup>11</sup> (Nancy, 2007: p.10).

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<sup>11</sup> Methexis (μέθεξις) generally means ‘participation’ or ‘communication’. It can be meant as an active tension of the subject towards an intelligible phenomenon that is collectively shared (such as a piece of art).

Moreover, I consider the opposite kind of directionality, the one defining a trajectory that aims at the subject's inner space, to be the most valuable and interesting in the phenomenon 'music'. In fact, any sound image will not just recall an imaginary cause, but also the sense that the specific imagined cause has for the individual listener. In other words, the listener constructs imaginary causes and at the same time recalls to the conscious mind the relationship he or she has or has had with those causes. The sound images become mirrors that reflect the subject's own experience and relation with the world, a mirror that allows the 'sudden salience of psyche' that Gaston Bachelard considers proper to poetic images (2014: p.1) and can lead to catharsis and reveries. In front of the rich interconnection of sound images that is a composition of *musique concrète*, the listener's inner space resonates with it, becoming an ear that listens to itself.

## **1.6 Composing the meta-space: on time and space**

It is often said, and it is common opinion, that music is *the art of time*. Its articulation, the very idea that it begins and ends, defining a period of time, corroborates this idea. Both in the organization and the bringing to fruition of a concert, time is a crucial issue - how long is it going to last and how is that interval of time divided? At the same time the kind of comments and criticism a listener can bring to what he or she listens to, often concerns time and its organization: it could last less or more time, that passage is too long or too short, etc. On the contrary, space is confined to a parametrical dimension, seen as an accessory that the listener can do without. It is often seen as an unessential decoration that does not have any effect on the actual integrity of the musical piece. Nonetheless, if one thinks carefully about the way

time is considered and treated by composers a few interesting elements come out that can change this common view.

The composer, like every other artist who works with time and needs to conceptualize and represent it, always spatializes time. In paper music, the composer traces a line (the score) and writes discrete signs on top of it to represent sound events. In other words, there is a translation of time (a flowing incorporeal perception of motion) into a stable image (a line or a set of lines, i.e. spatial objects) in order to explore it constantly and continuously, in order to have it all available at once. This translation is even more evident when electroacoustic music is taken into account. In the recent past, sound was captured on *meters* of tape; nowadays it appears visually represented on a two-dimensional space that we call the time-line. We move chunks of sounds up, down, backward or forward depending on our needs. We work on and in a spatial dimension in order to deliver to the listener an experience that he or she is going to enjoy in the time domain. The process of spatialisation of time is not a betrayal of direct experience; it is just coherent with our culture as we are accustomed to see time as a line or a vector because of our social and cultural context strongly influenced by Christian finalism.<sup>12</sup> Therefore there are two parallel truths: on the one hand, we experience music as a temporal event; on the other, we work on it often spatializing that experience, i.e. we make it amenable to exploration.

The direct temporal experience of a piece of music establishes quite a problematic relationship with space too. As I have tried to underline in this chapter, *listening is spatial*,

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<sup>12</sup> In the same way other cultures have represented space with other geometrical figures, such as circles.

consisting of the exploration of sound and leading to that resonance of spaces that I called evocation, i.e. the simultaneous exploration of inner and outer images. Nonetheless, movement is not without time and, conversely, time is not without movement.<sup>13</sup> It is in that mutual relationship between the two dimensions that it is possible to find the beauty of a musical work and the isolation of one of the two terms would just lead to a total falsification. In a way, we could even say that time is another element that works as a frame for the sound image, that limits it, allowing the spatial process to take place, giving to the beginning and the end of an audio take their actual role and identity. Moreover, the experienced time is the time of the exploration, i.e. of the process space. The composer deals with space and time together. In my own approach to composition, my priority is always to trigger resonance and poetic reverie in the listener. In fact, I think about time as the context in which I can build-up a *meta-space* made of all those spatial entities, the sound images, that I carefully crafted. To the definition with which I opened this paragraph, that music is the art of time, I counterpose the idea that music is *the art of space deployed in time*. This definition could appear to be easily applicable to any other art, such as installations or sculpture, which are making extensive use of space. Martin Heidegger himself, in the already quoted work *Bemerkungen zu Kunst* [Remarks on Art] (2010) takes sculpture as the perfect example for his theory, as that is *the art that realizes an actual confrontation with space*. Nonetheless, that only makes sense when we speak about ‘space’ in its common usage of one of the two dimensions of our surrounding reality. Instead, when I speak about space deployed in time, I include all that I theorized in the previous paragraphs, i.e. that space is not just a locative designation, but the process of exploration of a generic image. Surely, images are here assumed to be of varied kinds and

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<sup>13</sup> This is the reason why, as I said before, Newton felt the need of an absolute time and space beyond the relativity of human experience.

typologies. So any art relies upon the same mechanism and is not dissimilar from music. At the same time, maybe echoing certain Romantic positions, I consider *musique concrète* a special category, a sort of *primus inter pares*, the spatial character of which is particularly strong because of its paradoxical being – both extremely abstract and extremely physical at the same time. In fact, I think that, far more than other arts, *musique concrète* is able to trigger the resonance of spaces (i.e. evocation as described in the previous paragraphs), encompassing the world of total abstraction and playing with multiple levels of interpretation of a single image. At the same time, sound as a phenomenon is unique in its own way of animating the human body, making the physical self literally resonate with it.

One big question concerning everything I have discussed in this chapter remains unanswered. If listening consists of the exploration of images and this exploration acts in the highly personal domain of sense, how can I compose something whose purpose is to be shared with an audience? In other words, if the experience of the sound images and their meta-space is subjective, on what basis can I try to stimulate another's subjectivity? Certainly, every image has something that is inter-subjectively shared, but the sense of the listening experience belongs to the listener alone: it is so complexly rooted in the individual self that is inaccessible to me. Whilst I question the whole possibility of an actual communication of defined messages or meanings to the listener, I still think that it is possible to find strategies that allow the creation of a 'common ground'. Nonetheless I am conscious that it is not something I can take for granted and it will not necessarily work with everyone who listens to my work. These applied strategies are the subject of next chapter, where I will analyse and discuss several aspects of my compositions, giving precise references to the works in this Portfolio and information about the way in which I developed them.

**Chapter II**  
**THE *CONCRÈTE* WORKS**

[REDACTED]

Italo Calvino, *Un re in ascolto*

## 2.1 On my approach to electroacoustic composition

My approach to electroacoustic composition is not that of a person with a classical music background and education. I started studying Music and New Technology at the Conservatoire quite late in my life. Prior to that, I used to listen and produce underground dance music, being particularly influenced by Trip Hop, Dub and Dubstep. Certain obscure atmospheres in my *concrète* pieces are perhaps also rooted in my passion for those genres. Moreover, I think that the importance of the low drones, which often bind together whole sections of my works, derives from the fundamental role the bass line has always had for me in my previous years as a DJ and producer. In many other respects, though, the way I compose today derives from a sort of opposition to that background. I used to DJ and, yet, strangely, I always missed the point of the extreme loudness of dance music. In fact, I often considered it to be something expected and imposed, but which compromised the possibility of truly perceiving and understanding certain aspects of the music itself. I felt freer to ‘be quiet’ when I started exploring IDM and when I approached electroacoustic music for the first time I was enthusiastic about the idea of using only very low dynamics. This is something that still characterizes my pieces, where the dynamic range is deliberately extremely natural and compression is never used in a final and obsessive search for “punchy” sound.

The lack of a classical background is something that I experienced also as a personal deficiency and this led me to establish certain constraints in the compositional process, so to be able to focus on what I considered fundamental issues. My decision to use just the stereo format, avoiding an expansion into the field of multichannel composition, certainly has its origin here. I thought that I had to learn other things before engaging with multichannel



techniques. Nonetheless, even if that was the starting point, it soon became both an aesthetic and pragmatic need. In fact, I consider stereo an extremely comfortable format for distributing my work, as the actual master is identical to what other people can listen to on their own stereo systems at home. Moreover, I think that it allows very interesting approaches to sound diffusion which are often missing in a normal presentation of a multichannel work.<sup>14</sup> Finally, I think that stereo, encouraging the human inclination towards frontal listening, can be seen as a format which allows more attention and intimacy with regard to a very well defined (maybe framed) object.

## **2.2 On the frequent use of no-input mixing board**

Throughout my portfolio I have repeatedly used certain specific sound sources that I found particularly fascinating or functional to my intentions. The most evident is the sometimes rough, sometimes subtle output of my no-input mixing board. I experimented with analogue feedback for the very first time at the University of Birmingham,<sup>15</sup> in Studio 1. One of the old mixers used once for the B.E.A.S.T. system was left there and, together with two colleagues (Visa Kuoppala and Martin Ozvold), I started playing with it, exploiting the high number of

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<sup>14</sup> I think that the process of diffusion is actually an act of interpretation and that much of this act disappears in a standard multichannel diffusion. Something more interesting can be achieved if the system on which one performs is extremely large and complex and includes several rings of eight speakers (such as the B.E.A.S.T.). But this is rare – in the majority of systems one ends up working with just one ring and often in difficult and irregular (which do not allow circular distribution of speakers) locations.

<sup>15</sup> I am excluding here the sounds of Larsen effect which I always found a very interesting and usable source.

channels and sends per channel that it offered. I was so fascinated with the sounds produced that, after its removal, I bought an old, small mixer and I kept experimenting at home.

The primary reason why I got so much into the no-input mixing board was that it represented something totally opposite to what I normally did in the studio. In fact, it is a semi-chaotic system in which the slightest change of a single parameter can totally subvert the final outcome (and very often it is not enough to turn back the knob to its original position in order to get back to the previous sound). Hence it represented something diametrically opposite to my *concrète* practice. I thought that it could be useful for me to start improvising, in order to acquire a different kind of consciousness of sound from the one that I was used to in the process of composition. In the end, I think that I managed to have a decent level of control of the system. Strangely, many gestures that I produced started resembling the ones typical of the acousmatic production and *vice versa*: my fixed pieces started to include streams of sound images which could be taken from a piece of free improvisation or experimental music.

Another major aspect of no-input mixing that I found extraordinarily interesting was of course the sound images produced through it. The great richness of very high pitched sounds, the very extended low end and subtle but sharp mid-range offered me a rich palette of sources on which to work. I particularly loved the effect of depth and distance that it was possible to perceive when these three elements were all there at the same time (perhaps because of the different directionality of the sounds produced). If, for example, high pitched material (often very loud sine waves around 7, 12 and 15 KHz) sounded near and very present, creating a sort of first layer right in front of the listener, then all the rest seemed 'behind', at different levels of depth. When I started being able to stabilize the image, without having any unexpected

change, I remember that I also tended just to stop improvising and would sit back, getting lost in that unreal soundscape, the frame of which was given both by qualitative elements (the frequency content, the lack of reverberation, the clearly artificial source of those sounds) and locative ones (the illusion of different layers of depth given by the directional character of the components of the image).

When I started experimenting with the no-input mixing board I was already, in my composition, considering multiple ways of characterizing the sound images that I was using so that it could be useful for the musical discourse. I think that my thinking about the frame of the sound image gained a great deal from the meeting between my mixing board based practice and composition itself, as it allowed me to realize a confrontation with totally different materials and modes of listening. Noticing differences (very evident) and resemblances (e.g. the kind of layering of levels of depth I discussed above) between the no-input mixing board experience and what I was composing in studio allowed me to deepen the understanding of what I meant by frame and image, and allowed me to consider in a new light the interaction between very different images in the same context – slowly leading me towards the idea of a meta-space where all the single images are linked.

Going through my portfolio in chronological order, it will be evident that the presence of synthesised sound from my small feedback mixer has grown over time, reaching its culmination in two pieces *Distante, sospeso* and *La boucle*. Nonetheless I consider the best realization of this meeting between two parallel worlds to be in the last piece, *Buifichazioni*, in which I really worked on the edge between improvisation and composition.

### 2.3 On the different levels of framing and the meta-space

The discussion undertaken in the previous chapter has a strongly theoretical character. Even so, it does not come from nowhere, but has a direct relationship with the practical outcome of my PhD, i.e. my portfolio of *concrète* works. These two sides of my research constantly overlapped, alternated and influenced each other; they do not represent two different phases of the research itself. This is precisely the reason why I decided to go through the works in my portfolio in a chronological order, showing how small practical limitations, accidents or moments of reflection allowed me to start thinking at a deeper level about what I wanted to obtain (or, *vice versa*, how certain abstract elements of my speculative side influenced the way I made music).

What I proposed in the previous chapter is a sort of small theory of perception, in order to explain my relationship to recorded sounds in general. I would like to underline again that the theory of sound, space and evocation that I illustrated represents for me a substratum on which my conception of music stands. As I said, the process of framing and exploring (i.e. space) is never interrupted. In a way this is similar to the elements of Peirce's semiotic triangle, infinite repetitions of this process occur between the listener and the actual sound, and images could be seen as the infinite links of an infinite chain. These links can acquire a more practical or conceptual meaning depending on the end of the chain on which we are focusing: the subject or the object. Thus, in a generic discussion about the way a subject perceives sound it makes sense to speak about abstract, conceptual or psychological frames – as in, for example, the disjunction between the sound and its original source as underlined by François Bayle in his first definition of *i-son* (1993: 186). At the same time, as soon as we

start focusing on the sound image itself, it is fundamental to understand how real that frame can be – although always very complex and articulated, and often not immediately evident. In its most empirical version the frame is nothing but the sonic consequences of the way in which the disjunction is operated, i.e. the characterization given to the sound through the equipment and the techniques, both during the recording and the post-production in a studio. This latter point is of great importance: the frame is given first of all by the mean of the equipment used for recording.

Any professional in the field of audio knows that there is no such thing as a perfect recording technique: different techniques deliver different results and are usable under different conditions. It is a matter of taste, of technical limitation and of obstacles found in the location itself. Whilst when one speaks about producing a CD of classical music there are certain constraints related to the need for transparency and high quality sound; in the field of creative recordings (both indoor and outdoor) the discourse changes slightly. All the equipment available is usable from the worst low-fi microphone to the best high-end recorder. In this case, though, whoever is recording needs to be conscious of the different effects that the equipment used will determine – i.e. he needs to know how different the result will be in terms of the way the sound is cut out of its original context. This is the first level of frame, which concerns the actual production of the sound image, the way in which the disjunction is operated. I myself preferred many times low-quality hand-made lavalier microphones to my Neumann KM184s, just because of their timbre, noise and limitations and just because they could deliver a very specific kind of frame.

The frame, however, can be modified and varied in post-production. Thanks to the most modern digital tools, it is possible to erase the original background noise and reverberation from a recording almost entirely, to equalize it, to introduce another kind of reverb etc. All these operations have specific intentions behind them but, once again, when one comes to the creative elaboration of sound, all the tools can be used in more radical ways. Composers of *musique concrète* habitually alter the original frame in order to deliver a specific kind of image by the mean of digital or analogue post-production in a studio. I often introduced certain sounds in analogue feedback chains, sent them to old radios and then re-recorded them, or used de-noisers and de-reverberation tools, simply to obtain very specific frames for the sound images I wanted to use in my compositions.

A more conceptual level of framing is the one that, as I will discuss in the following paragraphs, allowed me to manage form. The temporal domain, on which the spatial process is deployed, can be framed itself in such an evident way that it guides the listener's exploration. My own solution for making this temporal framing evident and effective is the use of sudden and fast articulated sound (very often digital glitches or pops) that act as gates, opening and closing the 'access' to specific sections and micro-sections of a piece. The work in which this process was put into practice most clearly is *Les dimensions du réel*, but it also became a solution very much used in many subsequent pieces.

The articulation of these different levels of frame in the continuity of a piece defines a constant interchange of levels of perception of the image, as they act at a qualitative, locative and temporal level, all at the same time. I initially conceived it as a way to encourage the listener's interest and tension towards the piece of music itself. The conscious game

established by means of this continuous interchange is the core of what I previously defined as the meta-space of the composition, i.e. the whole which results from the articulation of several moments of framing and exploration, the articulation of several ‘spatial moments’. The meta-space is nothing other than the way in which those elements that I defined as ‘spatial’ – the sound images – enter into a mutual relationship and, in doing so, start meaning and making sense in a new way. What I consider the meta-space is thus something comparable to the concept of harmony in the classical pitch-based repertoire. Whilst the latter is a theory of the vertical overlapping of different notes based on specific grammar-like relationships and ratios, the meta-space is an umbrella term that, on the side of more traditional aspects of the musical discourse (form, morphology of sounds, pitch content, etc.), aims at including those decisions taken by the composer on the basis of all the elements that define listening as a spatial experience, leading to that moment of resonance that I called evocation (see Chapter 1).

## **2.4 The portfolio of compositions**

### **2.4.1 Inexorabilia**

*Format:* Stereo

*Duration:* 6:20

*Year:* 2012

When I began my MPhil I had just finished composing a four-channel piece titled *Krúos* (2011) for my BA graduation. It was based on a single type of sound-source, crystal glasses

hitting each other, which I tried to develop through extended editing and processing in the most disparate ways. Considering the improvement in technical skills that I earned from that experience, I thought of employing the same method, and decided to write a short piece, again based on a single source: the sound of a metallic coffee can rotating on a wooden surface. Because of the nature of that sound, whose behaviour corresponds to an evident physical movement that unavoidably tends to finish, to stop, I decided to call the work *Inexorabilia*, the Latin expression for ‘the relentless things’, that could remind the listeners of *the* relentless thing: death.

To work on *Inexorabilia* I took inspiration from the English acousmatic tradition, trying to focus more on gesture articulation and getting to the extreme of ‘explosion-like’ events, yet keeping in mind the character of the original sound material. Nonetheless, I used a considerable amount of DSP to transform the sound into something else, and this particular elaboration was often done within the DAW project itself, not on standalone software. Moreover, I was proceeding from the beginning to the end of the piece without a clear formal scheme or idea for the development of the musical discourse in my mind, just trying to follow what sound itself was suggesting. The result was a DAW project that was extremely heavy on my computer: in the end I was obliged to split it into three different projects, working on them separately and therefore getting three actual takes that I put together just at the end to obtain the full length piece.

The technical limitation that made me work on different sections of the piece separately reminded me of the limits of analogue equipment and magnetic tape that led composers of *musique concrète* in the analogue era to deal with chunks of compositions, literally pieces of



tape, often arriving at *suite-like* forms instead of continuous pieces. I had always deeply admired the way in which those composers had transformed a technical limitation into an aesthetic stance, obtaining works that proposed single ‘ideas’ in the form of short miniatures, but which, when taken all together, created large-scale suites that still appeared consistent to listeners and could be recognized as a coherent whole. It is probably because of this that I forced myself to recognize the limitation I found as a positive element, and started considering ways of exploiting the situation. The three sections are roughly:

1 – 0:00 to 1:38

2 – 1:38 to 4:21

3 – 4:21 to 6:20

Although I composed them separately, I worked on the final mix in order to obtain a continuous flow, overlapping segments that were actually longer than those listed above, and already included some connecting element (like the prolonged drone that links the second and third sections). The thing I found most interesting and stimulating was to feel free to place these fragments in the order I preferred and considered to give the most satisfying aural result. In the piece, they are not presented in the order I composed them: I worked first on the second section, then on the third and finally on the first.

*Inexorabilia* has technical limitations that are quite evident when one pays attention to the sonic quality of the sounds: the original images I recorded were quite dark, lacking higher harmonics because of the quality of the surface on which the coffee pot was rotating, and having prominent low frequencies because of the proximity effect generated by my

positioning of the cardioid microphones used for recording. Yet I considered the sounds very interesting, mainly because of the symbolic value with which I loaded them. The extreme predictability of the sound evolution suggested by that image was for me a perfect allegory of death, an unavoidable, inexorable event indeed. In this context, the apparent deficiencies of the original sound material did not seem to me to be a problem I had to solve; instead the darkness of the recordings simply helped me to reinforce the poetic idea on which I structured the piece. It can be said that the sound as it was triggered in me that resonance that in Chapter 1 I defined as evocation. This happened also thanks to its frame, which first attracted my attention and was defined by a problematic recording that implied an unrealistic result (lacking high frequencies and being loaded with low ones).

The sound that closes the piece, the slightly metallic drone that was itself derived from the original sound material, suggested to me the moment of final oblivion, the absolute end that the extinguishing rotation evoked in my mind.

#### 2.4.2 Nella notte

*Format:* Stereo

*Duration:* 2:54

*Year:* 2013

In 2013 I received a commission from the association ‘Amici della Musica di Cagliari’ for a very short piece to be included in a collective concert inspired by Grimm’s fairy tales. A different tale was assigned to each composer, mine being *The wolf and the fox*. The story is

based on the nocturnal thefts undertaken by the two animals, underlining the greediness of the wolf and the sense of measure of the fox. Because each composition in the concert was intended to be preceded by an acousmatic voice reciting the tale, I decided to not approach the work in a narrative way, trying rather to elaborate something that could work as a ‘resonating space’ for the meaning expressed by the spoken part. Moreover, the concert was conceived for an audience of children and I tried to work on very simple images, something that could evoke the atmosphere of a fairy tale while being familiar and playful for the children themselves.

The solution I found was quite simple. I recorded the sound of myself blowing into a number of bottles, obtaining a few pitches that were modified through very simple techniques, such as soft amplitude modulation, resulting in a slight enrichment of the spectrum while keeping the original sound very clearly present for the listener. These bottle sounds had for me two advantages: their delicacy, mainly because of their soft attack and general simplicity, and the fact that they recalled in my mind an idea of the sound of hunting horns – once again a moment of evocation and a delivery of ‘sense’ that is very subjective, and on which I based the development of the whole work. The background is a set of nocturnal field recordings in which crickets and a few frogs dominate the scene. I carefully equalized them in order to really keep just those few animal sounds, almost erasing other unwanted elements (a few cars passing by, the background noise of the recording, etc.). I think that the resulting image, thanks to its dynamic range and the overlapping with the bottle sounds, already delivers an atmosphere of some suspense that I found to be suitable for the purpose of the piece. Nonetheless, it would have not been possible to obtain this atmosphere without the careful cleaning of the background field recording and the consequent alteration of its frame. The

original recording was noisy and very reminiscent of the context from which it was cut – crickets, the few frogs, the noises of nearby houses and streets all contributed to the evocation of very specific images. Cleaning it by means of advanced de-noiser processes allowed me to transform it in an image lacking space, the origin of which was not in a specific and real place. This idea was then reinforced by the addition of a digital reverb emulating the reverberation of the cathedral of Chartres. These two processes allowed me to work on the frame both in a qualitative and locative sense. The meta-space obtained by overlapping the resulting image and the one of the bottle sounds results in a whole that answered to my need of obtaining that suspended atmosphere I mentioned above, the character of which I considered suitable for a fairy tale.

Finally, I worked on the other elements – the crackling wood and the breathing – in order to create the idea of the presence of the animals in that context: fast, subtle movements in the wood of the two thieves – this was the very visual image that inspired me.

The very short duration of the piece in some way relieved the stress I had experienced with *Inexorabilia*, where, as mentioned above, the technical limitations were too strong to allow me to work on a single unitary project and a long time-scale. At that time, I naively thought that I was maybe more talented for short forms and aphorisms, something that I very much practised during my BA in Palermo. *Nella notte* appeared to me as the perfect scale of duration for my kind of workflow and approach to sound, an idea that readily changed when I moved to the next project of my PhD.

### 2.4.3 Les dimensions du réel

*Format:* Stereo

*Duration:* 18:56

*Year:* 2014

Immediately after composing *Nella notte*, I started re-considering long form in the light of the tradition of the ‘French suite’ and of my experience with *Inexorabilia*. With these reference points in mind, I started working on a new piece, a ‘suite of fragments’ that I decided to call *Les dimensions du réel* [The dimensions of reality], a title that, on the one hand, is a homage to the French concrete repertoire and, on the other, refers to the way I decided to work with sound material, establishing an ambiguous equilibrium between abstract, non-referential sound images and field recordings. This is probably the work of this portfolio in which the concepts expressed in the first Chapter are put into practice in the most evident way. As I will discuss, the piece is characterized by frequent abrupt switches from one mode of framing to another, as well as from a specific kind of equilibrium in the meta-space to another.

In *Les dimensions du réel* I worked in fragments, precisely as in *Inexorabilia*. Nonetheless this time I wished to explore the possibilities that composing by fragments could offer, in order to start developing a personal and peculiar kind of discourse. In fact, this time I wanted the fragments to be evident, almost detached and not mixed in such a way as to obtain a continuous flow. They had to work as a temporal framing in the form of the composition – a macro-framing. The resulting piece is a suite divided into two ‘volumes’, made up of three fragments each, and separated by a very short interlude of about forty seconds. *Table 1*

summarizes the structure of the piece; in the last column the chronological order of the making of each fragment is listed.

<b>Volume I</b>	<i>Frag. 1</i>	00:00-03:35	1 <sup>st</sup>
	<i>Frag. 2</i>	03:35-07:05	3 <sup>rd</sup>
	<i>Frag. 3</i>	07:05-09:25	2 <sup>nd</sup>
<b>Interlude</b>		09:25-10:07	6 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Volume II</b>	<i>Frag. 1</i>	10:07-11:56	4 <sup>th</sup>
	<i>Frag. 2</i>	11:56-16:27	7 <sup>th</sup>
	<i>Frag. 3</i>	16:27-18:56	5 <sup>th</sup>

**Table 1:** structure of *Les dimensions du réel*, including duration and chronological order of making of each fragment.

Considering the kind of general evocative effects that I wanted to deliver, two elements emerged as being of fundamental importance in this piece. The first is *silence*, which works as a means of separation between the fragments I composed, as well as a space dedicated to the resonance of the listening self (i.e. the process of evocation that I discussed in Chapter 1), comparable to the blank page in between the tales of an anthology of writings. Underlining the separation of the several fragments, silence works as a fundamental means to obtain the temporal framing mentioned above. The second key element is the *coherence of atmospheres between the fragments*, which I think is achieved in two different ways. On the one hand there are recurrent elements that act as formal connections, often working over long ‘distances’ inside the piece, thanks to the fact that the fragments were re-ordered after making them. In addition to this, a few sounds have been added after the making of all the fragments in order

to create further connections: an example is the low percussion at 4'27'', derived from the one at 2'52''. Another method used to achieve the above-mentioned coherence of atmosphere is a substantial limitation in the timbral colour of the whole work that, as someone once underlined after listening to the piece in one of Birmingham University studios, keeps a sort of *black and white* dimension for its whole duration. This is achieved first of all through a consistent use of mixing, in which all the field recordings are kept at low levels, always representing a basic layer, a background, on the top of which all the other sounds are organized.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it was of great importance to keep a natural articulation of dynamics throughout the whole work, as well as to avoid the use of bright and harmonically rich drones and synthesized elements.

Re-ordering the fragments of *Les dimensions du réel* after making them has been for me quite interesting and enjoyable. I think that, in the end, whilst maintaining an overall consistency of atmosphere, it also allowed me to obtain a sort of *incoherent coherence* that characterizes the whole piece and manages to surprise the listener. This oxymoron is given at the macro level of form by that strange reconnection between sounds and images that, originally used at close time intervals (e.g. in two fragments that follow each other in the chronology of making) have been then moved to different points of the work together with the fragment to which they belonged. This creates continuous reconnection, jumps, references, which are not consciously established in the compositional process and maybe are not always evident on the first listening (but I believe can be perceived at an unconscious level). I recognize in this oxymoron the same character as my reveries, moments that cannot be reduced to a 'getting

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<sup>16</sup> I think that *Les dimensions du réel* should be listened to at levels that make the field recording that opens the work just realistic. This is true both for home and concert diffusion.

lost' in my own thoughts, or be flattened in the concept of dream. In fact, as Bachelard declares, the main difference between a dream and a reverie is the *cogito*, because in the reverie the spirit is always present, aware of itself, relaxed and active (2014: pp. 5-6). In another passage, the French philosopher declares:

*Nothing prepares a poetic image, especially not culture, in the mode of literature, and especially not perception, in the psychological sense.*<sup>17</sup>

(Bachelard, 2014: p. 8)

In order to give back to the listener what Bachelard would have defined as the unprepared experience of the poetic image, for the first time, when composing *Les dimensions du réel*, I consciously worked on the different levels of the framing of the several sound images proposed. The sudden changes of direction that the fragments determine, the interruptions given by clicks, pops and short chunks of noise, the suspension of long dark tales of low percussions, the pauses and breaks longer or shorter than one would expect... these are all elements that, in my view, are functional to define, throughout the whole piece, continuous switches in the temporal as well as qualitative and locative framing of the sound images. Clicks and pops, in particular, often have the role of changing perspective, switching from one image to the other or between different qualitative or locative frames of the same image. This latter case is well represented by the excerpt of voice and viola taken from György Kurtág's *Kafka Fragmente*, which first appears at 11:40, slightly panned to the left of the stereo image. When the singing voice is introduced, this happens together with a radio noise

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<sup>17</sup> 'Une image poétique, rien ne la prépare, surtout pas la culture, dans le mode littéraire, surtout pas la perception, dans le mode psychologique'. Trans.: M. Clemente.



that also includes some bit of voice, barely audible. If we consider the meta-space of this first fragment of the second part of the work, the singing voice establishes a relationship both with this radio noise (located at the opposite side of the stereo image), and the reverberated recording of the children shouting and playing, which was made in front of a school near my house in Birmingham. This double relationship is given both by a locative and qualitative frame: the panning, the reverberation and the apparent distance this suggests, the transparency of sound despite the noisy meta-space to which it belongs. It is the click at 11:42 though that suddenly operates a switch in the meta-space that also coincides with a change in the framing of the musical excerpt. In fact, the click interrupts the recording of children, leaves the last fragment of the voice alone, in the very centre of the stereo image, and lets in the viola imitation of the voice itself. This small excerpt from Kurtág's work is here presented first in a situation in which it appears coherent with the meta-space previously created through the other images. Then, by the mean of the click at 11:42, it changes frame, shows itself for what it is: a recording of a musical performance that is not part of what was previously heard, and which ends up interrupted in a loop that resembles a jumping CD or vinyl. Hence, if we focus on the music excerpt, the click here works as an element that allows the switch from a certain qualitative/locative frame to another. If we look at the meta-space in which that excerpt initially appears, the click also has the fundamental function of underlining a specific temporal framing: it interrupts the children, cutting this out of the discourse, almost declaring that it was just an illusion and it is now time to move on and explore something else. In fact, the first fragment is going to finish soon and the switch alerts the listener, delivering a sense of conclusion.

The change of perspective created by means of the digital glitches is even more evident in other passages, where a switch subverts the equilibrium of the meta-space of the composition, presenting the listener with several moments in which the same material is used in different proportions or roles. One of the most meaningful, as it also offers to the listener elements which are unique and will not be found recalled in other sections of the work, is the sequence that starts at 5:00 and ends at 6:35. Here the background field recording, made of a mix of city and train noises, works at the beginning as a basic layer on top of which small gestures and micro-sound are articulated. The abrupt sounds at 5:04 and 5:16 change the general equilibrium of this background level, which is revealed as a mix of different sound images. After the change at 5:16 the train clearly emerges from the mix and it is no longer just a background image evoking an urban landscape, but it starts entering into a morphological relationship with the radio noise that presently becomes dominant on the right channel. The two sounds nearly imitate each other. Nonetheless, both these images together, one on the left, the other on the right of the stereo image, behave in a way that is still conforms to the generic image of a train approaching the station: the meta-space of this short section is characterized by this ambiguity. This image is abruptly interrupted itself by a sudden change of the radio noise, which is articulated in a fast movement from right to left at 5:27. This introduces to a short section in which the train disappears and the new fundamental sound image, the new main character, is a modulated noise that resembles a musical theme. This specific sound image represents an *unicum* in the piece, as it is not used anywhere else, not even in a varied form. After a return of the radio noise already presented before, at 5:57 the train comes back in the discourse: the theme becomes an echo in the background, destined to disappear, and the train, together with the radio noise, finishes the discourse started in the previous mini-section and lead the listener to the end of the fragment by means of a slow crescendo.

As it is possible to see from these short descriptions of two passages of *Les dimensions du réel* just exposed, the whole musical discourse in this piece is characterized by very evident changes of framing that act at different levels: both on the single sound image (locative and qualitative framing) and on the meta-space and form (temporal framing). Of course these levels interact, overlap and often coincide. The frequent sudden changes guarantee the piece a certain sense of incoherence that contrasts with the substantially uniform atmosphere and the obsessive repetition or presence of certain specific images (e.g. the radio noises, the trains and city nocturnal field recording, the shouting birds, etc.) or morphologies (e.g. the fast movements of sounds from one side of the stereo image to the other, with a peak of loudness in the very centre). I thought, while composing, that this aspect of the piece could maybe encourage reverie and that resonance that I call evocation. In fact, the reverie, the sudden exploration of a poetic image that is in itself and by itself, is a fulgurating peak of consciousness, where the most inconsistent elements are still comprehended in their total unity, presenting the same kind of incoherent coherence that I tried to offer to the listener in this piece.

I must say that the ideas themselves of ‘fragmentation’ and ‘incoherent coherence’, as expressed above, have been also inspired by non-musical works. My passion for Jorge Luis Borges anthologies of short stories (*Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949) above all) and the poetics of the labyrinth were of extreme importance. In the same way, Paul Klee’s paintings and drawings, and his idea of cutting a painting and presenting it in two or more pieces, often in positions that do not allow the viewer immediately to re-build the original picture, inspired me in the practice of cutting and re-organizing fragments of compositions, as I described in the previous chapter.

*Les dimensions du réel* is a piece of fundamental importance in my output. On the one hand, I think that it really mirrors what I experienced during the period of its composition, a long time (more than a year) of insomnia: during those nights I was constantly on the boundary between sleeping and wakefulness, and sounds from outside my room, inside my house and from my own dreams were constantly mixing. On the other hand, thanks to this piece I started thinking differently about my general approach to field recordings and dynamics, trying to work almost on the edge of listening, at extremely quiet levels. In order not to be tempted to push up the levels of the sections of soundscapes that act as background throughout the whole piece, I avoided respecting the basic rule of making recordings – i.e. trying to obtain the best signal-to-noise ratio. I was recording quietly and yet, thanks to the high quality of equipment I was using, the resulting recordings were very detailed, rich and defined. I often recorded during the night. It was for me the best time because, suffering from insomnia, I was at least doing something useful for my work; at the same time, I was able to capture the sound of Birmingham by night – the nocturnal birds and fauna from the parks, or the very far noise of traffic, that sort of mysterious and fascinating drone that often functions as a main background sound in this piece.

The absence of human presence became of fundamental importance as well. I wanted everything to sound far off, distant. Through the low dynamics I wanted to push the listener to get nearer to the speakers, projecting him or her towards a possible ‘background of the background’ and encouraging the exploration of the images I was offering. In order to amplify this sensation, I decided to not use voices and obvious human sounds in a prominent way, always filtering and transforming them in one way or another. One obvious solution was

the use of a very prominent reverberation, as occurs at 7:05 with what were originally the shouts of field hockey players. Another less obvious technique was to play certain recordings through a small FM transmitter and then record the sound coming out of the low-fi speaker of a small radio, as I did with a small fragment of Kurtág's *Kafka fragmente* at about 11:40, as well as with an excerpt from an interview given by Carmelo Bene at 11:57. Through these techniques, I transformed what could appear as a clear human presence into what is perceived as vestiges of it, a way of approaching voice that I used much more from that moment on.

#### 2.4.4 Distante, sospeso

*Format:* Stereo

*Duration:* 16:25

*Year:* 2014

In the months following the conclusion of *Les dimensions du réel*, I thought about how to make the paradoxical incoherent coherence of form even stronger, moving beyond the suite form towards a continuous piece that could still be based on the composing-by-fragments approach. At that time, I was fascinated by the first movement of *Equus, Grand Véhicule* by Olivier Capparos and Lionel Marchetti (2009), a piece that appears to be strongly fragmented and sectioned, yet for me extremely beautiful and evocative of a strong sense of nostalgia. Inspired by this work, as well as by my previous compositions, I realized *Distante, sospeso*, a symbolic piece that contains many references to my personal situation abroad and that I thought of as an outburst of the confusion that being 'landless' generated in me. In fact, after a few years spent in UK, I could not recognize Palermo as my home anymore; but I did not

feel at home in Birmingham either. I experienced a strong sense of loneliness, disorientation and confusion that I tried to convey through this piece. In order to do this, I decided to apply a slightly conceptual approach that, on the one hand, consisted of the use of symbolic vocal elements that could establish a relation with Sicily, my general state of mind and the kind of life-style and routine I had in Birmingham; on the other, it was based on a way of articulating fragments that did not conform to an idea of beauty and proportion, rather of disproportion and apparent confusion. This approach was intended to mirror the disorientation I was experiencing and desired to express. In this sense, *Distante, sospeso* is not a 'beautiful' piece, and does not necessarily work for every listener. Yet it retains, in my view, the appearance of an interesting and relatively obscure experiment, jumping from one sonic world to another and establishing a deliberately inconsistent meta-space.

One of the strategies implemented in the piece is to position fragments, each with a content that could suggest a certain kind of formal function, in positions that strongly contrast with that function. As an example, the fragment that goes from 5:50 to 9:40, because of its harmonic content and the way it is organized, could suggest a drop in tension intended to lead towards the end of the piece. However, the following fragment, a confused and strongly gestural one, suddenly interrupts the decaying tail of the harmonic drone, bringing the piece to an unexpected moment of tension. This pitch-based section of the work is interesting as it can be considered the perfect example of a peculiar kind of framing operating at the level of the meta-space, based on a change of barycentre in the musical discourse. In fact, after a first fragment built on sound images derived from analogue feedback and radio sound and noises (00:00-05:45), the movement to a section mainly based on a pitched drone represents by itself a sort of switch of context in which the listener can find different reference points for his own

process of exploration. His first reference point is now the ambiguity between major and minor tonalities in the drone (obtained by overlapping two versions of the same drone, one of which was pitched down of just a few semitones), and the sense of conclusion is derived by pitching down the drone itself, obtaining a vague sense of cadence.

Once again, the single fragments, composed separately, have been re-positioned in an order different from the chronological order of making as shown in *Table 2*.

<b><i>Frag. 1</i></b>	00:00-05:45	1 <sup>st</sup>
<b><i>Frag. 2</i></b>	05:45-09:41	3 <sup>rd</sup>
<b><i>Frag. 3</i></b>	11:27-14:05	2 <sup>nd</sup>
<b><i>Frag. 4</i></b>	14:05-16:22	4 <sup>th</sup>

**Table 2:** structure of *Distante, sospeso* including duration and chronological order of making of each fragment.

As in *Inexorabilia*, there are elements such as field recordings or low frequency drones that act as bridges between the fragments, overlapping with the following one in order to give a certain sense of continuation, avoiding interruptions that would transform the piece into a suite. One interesting aspect of this piece is that one of the fragments, the third, is actually a mix of two different ones that were very similar, being based on analogous material and articulation. I treated them like they were recorded on pieces of magnetic tape and therefore not modifiable: I mixed them as they were, just playing with their volumes. In a way, this sort of analogue-like approach was coherent with the kind of sound images on which the piece is based. In fact, apart from the field recordings and certain others sounds recorded in the studio, the images here are mainly produced either with a small analogue synthesizer (such as the

drone that appears in the last section) or with my no-input mixing board, an analogue feedback system that allowed me to obtain certain peculiar sounds, including many of the high pitched sounds and the low iterative impulses of the first section.

As I outlined above, human presence is of great importance in this piece because of the highly symbolic value it has for me. Two key elements act as references to my homeland, Sicily. The first is a small excerpt from a Sicilian folk song by Rosa Balistreri that appears at 2:12 and again at 10:50 and is strongly distorted using the same radio-based technique that I described earlier. This technique gives a very specific frame to the vocal excerpt used, the sense of which can be found in the meaning that radio recordings have for me: distance, nostalgia, unknown temporal and spatial location, even loneliness. Rosa Balistreri represents for me the most authentic side of Sicily, being a reference point for many people in the fight against the Mafia as well as against male chauvinism, whilst fully representing the cultural tradition of my homeland. The other symbolic elements are a few excerpts from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. In this case, as I do not particularly esteem that work, these elements represent the complex of clichés about Sicily, including those that are actually true or nearer to truth, as well as those of which many people, like me, are actually ashamed. I recognize in Mascagni's work a certain 'lack of taste' (an opinion that is totally personal and yet I cannot avoid declaring it) and I thought at that time that it could represent what I dislike or strongly criticize about my home town (including a certain simplistic or naïve view of Palermo and its problems). The elements used are the overture theme (in its piano adaptation) that appears at 1:26 and again at 10:50, as well as the famous shout '*hanno ammazzato compare Turiddu!*' that I used at 10:40.



Other vocal elements appear throughout the piece, which I loaded with another kind of meaning. The first is a small excerpt from T. S. Eliot's reading of his own *Four Quartets*, found on YouTube and recorded from there at really low quality: it is completely recognizable, both at the end of the first fragment and again at 12:44. The second is an excerpt from an interview given by Gilles Deleuze, whose works I was studying at the time, which can be found at the beginning of the second fragment. Somehow they represented for me my life of study in Birmingham, including the routine in which I was immersed, with all the positive and negative aspects together.

Although the voices used in *Distante, sospeso* are for me characterized by this kind of symbolic value, I do not consider its comprehension a key element for the listener to approach the piece. In a way, I thought that the appearance of those vocal elements that apparently do not have much to share with each other in terms of content, together with the strange articulation of fragments, could give a certain sense of disorientation to anyone listening to the work.

Nowadays, I do not consider *Distante, sospeso* one of my best works. Although I like certain sonic atmospheres and certain images I used, I must admit that it has for me more value as an etude in fragmentation, analogue sounds and the use of voice than as an actual piece of music. This is the main reason why I included it in my Portfolio, as it is a key step in my years of research, a sort of experiment that allowed me to understand something more about what I was aiming at with my work.

#### 2.4.5 Il habite partout

*Format:* Stereo

*Duration:* 6:25

*Year:* 2014

*Il habite partout* is a piece that I composed in just a couple of days and that was born from the original idea of extending *Les dimensions du réel* with additional movements. Although I felt that the kind of aesthetic discourse established by that earlier piece was not completely explored, I also understood that it would have not made sense for me to extend it following the same kind of principles. Therefore, I thought for the first time to work on the idea of a cycle of compositions that, whilst autonomous, all dealt with similar themes and adopted a similar kind of aesthetic approach to the use of sound images. Moreover, they had to be performable in the same concert, just one after the other. *Il habite partout* was conceived precisely in this way, and particularly to be the opening of the cycle.

One of the things I wanted to explore further was the potential positive and negative aspects of composing quite fast. I had realized *Les dimensions du réel* very slowly, spending about a year on it. This time I wanted to get back to the short time-scale, working very fast and trying to be as instinctive as possible. I also decided to explore in greater depth the use of the no-input mixing board, which I felt more and more to be for me a fundamental instrument, which I used both for improvisation and the production of sound material. Moreover, in that period I had already quite clearly in my mind the concept of *frame* as I expressed it in the first chapter. Whilst in *Les dimensions du réel* I had explored the fine line between dream, imagination and

reality, using the technical tools as a way to deliver a certain kind of evocative effect, this time I wanted to explore the space defined by the tools themselves. Therefore, I wanted vinyl sounds, electrical hums and the handling and background noises of equipment to become fundamental images, something with which I could build up a small world. In fact, these and a few other elements (such as the kick-like sound that I produced with a small Monotron synthesizer by Korg, the output of which I inserted into the feedback loop) are the main materials of the piece.

*Il habite partout*, meaning ‘it dwells in all things’ in French, is an adaptation of the sentence with which Schaeffer opens his *Solfège de l’objet sonore* (1998). The original is ‘Le son habite partout’ and is in turn a quotation of a text by Hoffmann. I considered it such a representative expression for what I was aiming at with my short composition, that I used Schaeffer’s own voice, extracted from the first CD of the *Solfège*, to open the last section of the work, at 3:40. In *Il habite partout* more than in other pieces, the qualitative frames of the different sound images are the main object of my reflections: many sounds are left untouched with their original noise or distortion (both due to the low quality of the recording or of the source). Even the low drone on which many sections of the piece are based sounds like a low resonance, a sound lacking transparency and definition, something that in another context would be seen as a deficiency. Sound dwells in all things, even in the tools used to produce it, in the mistake of handling noise, in that unavoidable filter, defined in the first chapter, that ends up being the composers’ main demarking tool.

#### 2.4.6 La boucle

*Format:* Stereo

*Duration:* 11:10

*Year:* 2015

If *Il habite partout* focuses on images defined by the technical means and *Les dimensions du réel* on the boundary between different states of reality, *La boucle*, the last chapter of the cycle, brings both elements back together, whilst giving a great importance to a clearly evident human presence. The piece is meant to be an homage to Luc Ferrari's work, using a few sounds from his sound archive (the initial gunshot followed by barking dogs and the subtle female laughter are two of them) and re-interpreting a few fundamental themes of his musical production in the light of my own compositional experience.

Once again electroacoustic feedback, the sound of machines and engines as well as field recordings and a few voice recordings are the elements on which the piece is based. Nonetheless this time a girl's breathing and panting are in a very well defined foreground (almost detached from the rest), at least in the first part of the piece. Appearing the first time at 1:13, their articulation then becomes more and more part of the whole sound flux of the piece, leading to a final crescendo where Antonin Artaud's *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* appears as an integral element of the analogue drone and, nearly masked by it, is transformed into the echo of a far away lament. In a way, introducing these elements in an initially detached foreground, I imagined that it was possible to capture the listener's attention on a different plane. As explained by Marchetti (2009), when put in front of a speaker we are,

in a certain way, in front of a mirror: this physical volume that is in front of us, emitting sound at about the same height as our head, strongly recalls our own phonatory system in the same way in which the microphone recalls our auditory system. When the loudspeaker emits a voice, this mirroring effect is even stronger, as we are captured by a sound image that appears familiar and, at the same time, not ours. We become strongly involved in its exploration. In fact, voice, breathing and panting act as ambiguous images, as we are never totally sure to whom they belong – so much so that we could even think about them as our own.

From 1:27 the breathing sounds start to be absorbed by a flux of sounds that are mainly clicks and noises from an old tape machine I found in Studio 1, at the University of Birmingham, as well as impulses, drones and a rip-like sound produced with my no-input mixing board. The meta-space initially established through Luc Ferrari's field recording, breathing and the elementary melody is abandoned and masked by a world of technology and analogue synthesis that establishes an ideal link with the sound images presented in *Il habite partout*. From now on, voices will again be just vestiges of human presence and nothing more: the reverberated and far away girls' laughter, small fragments of breathing and drones produced from them and Antonin Artaud's hallucinatory voice are all, once again, elements that act either in the background or as part of a bigger whole that includes that world of machinery introduced from the end of the first section of the piece.

To establish again a sense of disproportion, of incoherent coherence, a sense of circular form is suggested but not totally satisfied. In fact, the field recording with which everything started comes back, suggesting a potential return to the material of the first section. One would

expect at this point the short melody, perhaps varied, to return and be a foreground element once again, together with breathings and panting. Instead, an oscillating drone made up of sounds from a small analogue synthesizer and no-input mixing board start dominating the meta-space leading towards a crescendo that, suddenly interrupted, ends up in a sort of dying tape-machine engine. Again, my main purpose was to move into the territory of unpredictability, of surprise and paradoxical coexistence of incompatible formal elements, in order to trigger listeners' imagination.

#### 2.4.7 Buificazioni per Rimbaud

*Format:* Stereo

*Duration:* 28:30

*Year:* 2016

At the beginning of 2015 I contacted Dario Enea, a playwright and actor with whom I had already worked and whose writing and performances I greatly admire, to propose to him that we should work on a vocal piece together. The initial intention was to realize something that could be ascribed to the 'concrete opera' genre, following the example of Michel Chion's *Le prisonnier du son* (1995) or *La tentation de St. Antoine* (2003). Nonetheless I did not force Enea's work in any particular direction, completely trusting him with regard to the outcome of his work. For several years we had been familiar with each other's aesthetic approach to arts and I felt quite secure at entrusting the work on the text to him without intervening at all. When we finally met in person in order to discuss what he had produced, I was quite surprised to find that he had chosen to realize a collection of aphorisms, not a continuous text.

Moreover, they were far more than I had expected: 46 short texts that, once recorded, would have lasted about 50 minutes in total. Although what he wrote did not correspond to what I was expecting, I must say that the beauty of the text immediately won me over. It fitted exactly my own ideas and aesthetics of fragmentation, not just because it was structured in aphorisms, but because of the overall writing style. In many of the fragments, each word seemed to be an isolated image, the frame of which was modified by the subsequent one, tending to acquire a new sense each time a new term entered the discourse. The text presents one image after another in a non-narrative structure, a stream of spaces invaded by a strong sense of loneliness and darkness and a title that summed everything up: *Buificazioni*, i.e. an invented term, the root of which is the Italian term *buio* (i.e. darkness), that works at the same time as a homage to and an inversion of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. A text that is a slow walk towards darkness in 46 steps, from which I was free to choose the ones I considered the most suitable for my musical work.<sup>18</sup>

Out of the many aphorisms that Dario proposed to me, I selected five that we recorded in my personal studio in Palermo, which became the basic material for my work. Nonetheless, prior to receiving the actual text, I had imagined that I would compose a relatively long continuous piece, in which voices emerged from the sound flux, becoming occasionally the only material present for the listener. Having to deal with aphorisms, my perspective changed. As the text reminded me so much of my work with sound, I decided to not approach Dario's voice as something I had to put in the music, but rather focused on constructing a parallel sound discourse that could work in the same way as what he had written – i.e. that could establish a

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<sup>18</sup> For an attempt of translation of the text used in *Buificazioni*, please refer to Appendix, p.59

similar relationship with Rimbaud's original work. Moreover, those aphorisms (and particularly the ones I selected) were already extremely musical, demonstrating Enea's intention of going beyond meaning and following the example of Carmelo Bene who used to give a key role to the signifier more than to the signifying<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, after a sort of *ouverture* (0:00 – 6:37) that presents certain fundamental materials that will reappear throughout the whole work and introduce the listener to the kind of atmosphere that I thought to create, I decided to alternate a vocal fragment and a purely sonic one in a slow evolving suite. The sound images proposed, initially quite clear and defined, become more and more confused, establishing a process that goes over the single fragment to embrace the whole duration of the piece – in fact, a process of 'buificazione'. Working in this way posed a few problems: first of all, considering my natural tendency to imply a disappearing or remote human presence, such a strong presence of text and spoken voice appeared to me as a new element that I did not really know how to treat; secondly, I had to decide whether or not I wanted the sound to mirror, recall or evoke what the spoken word proposed in terms of visual images. In the end, in order to respect the intention of working with sound in a way that could be considered parallel and analogous to how Enea approached writing, I decided to keep the voice clearly recognizable, understandable and very often alone. Nonetheless, I still decided to apply to it elaboration techniques that already characterized my previous works. I gave recognizable and distinct frames to the various vocal fragments intended to give to the listener a certain idea of 'distance' in time or space from the voice. All the strategies implemented to transform the frame of the voice were thought to be transparent enough to let the listener understand the text. The main techniques have been simple ping-pong delays, reverbs,

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<sup>19</sup> On many public occasions, as well as in many of his own writings, Carmelo Bene repeatedly quoted Lacan declaring that 'the signifying is a stone in the mouth of the signifier' (1995).



analogue distortion and the already discussed playback of the voice on a radio by means of a small FM transmitter. Regarding the translation of the visual images proposed by the text into sound images, I decided to limit them to just a few moments, the most important being the water drop that appears in the second fragment. The first poem of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* is *Après le deluge* [After the flood], a sentence that also closes the first aphorisms written by Dario Enea. The water drop that appears alone and reverberated in the *ouverture* and then again around 23:40 in one of the last fragments, is then an opportunity to refer both to the original text and to Enea's work. Like him, I open my collection of aphorisms with a reference to the original text by Rimbaud.

I must admit that *Buifizzazioni* has been for me an ambitious project. Both its length and structure have been quite challenging. It is the longest piece I have ever composed and, unlike *Les dimensions du réel* and other works of mine, it was not based on short fragments assembled in a whole. On the contrary, despite it being a suite, it was composed in a continuous way, the single movements being developed in the very same chronological order as they appear in the final work. I must also admit that it is not easy listening. Composing *Buifizzazioni*, I really felt free to organize material with a very slow pacing, using rarefied gestural elements that I imagined to get lost in a dominant textural dimension. This way of organizing sound could result in a heavy listening experience but, for me, it was a fundamental expressive need. The decision of working in this way was also encouraged by the collaboration with Dario Enea, whose work is characterized by very long durations, slow evolution of scenes that are often based on the reiteration of certain sentences or movements, and a great attention to the evocative character of the use of light and elements of scenography. In an interview he recently gave on an online journal, he declared:

*I think about my own work and myself as something not original at all. I do not think I have ever found anything. [...] I am not an experimental artist because I do nothing but use already codified vocabularies... my work, if anything, consists in finding the gaps between those codes.*

(Enea, 2015)

Moving on the edge between improvisation and composition I think that I tried placing my sonic aphorisms in the same ‘gap in between codes’ that Enea talks about in his interview. I aimed at having a mixed aesthetic approach, not just based on the choice of sound material or sources that I used for the piece (which still includes a lot of untouched ‘chunks’ of no-input mixing board improvisations or radio-noise recordings), but also on the kind of length and slowness of certain fragments (or passages in the fragments). I tried to play with the alternation of ideas and modes of improvisation or experimental music, and other modes typical of the *musique concrète* tradition. This is true from the beginning when, after nearly 2 minutes of elements that could lead the listener to think it an experimental piece, and therefore to the possible evolution of the work in that sense, a gesture that is ‘far more acousmatic’ in its articulation arrives (at 2:02), establishing the ambiguity that will then characterize the whole work.

## **CONCLUSION**

*μη προσδοκώντας πλούτη να σε δώσει η Ιθάκη.*

*Η Ιθάκη σ'έδωσε τ'ωραίο ταξίδι.*

*Χωρίς αυτήν δεν θάβγαινες στον δρόμο.*

*Don't expect Ithaca to give you many riches.*

*Ithaca has already given you a fine journey.*

*Without Ithaca you would never have left.*

**Kostantinos Kavafis, *Ithaca*.**

I have presented in this Commentary the final summary of a journey that lasted several years and that I hope will continue for many more. It involved both long hours spent in the studio trying to develop a personal musical language that could establish a positive confrontation with the tradition of *musique concrète*, as well as moments of speculation and deep reflection on the consequences of my compositional choices. Following the example of Paul Klee, I thought that, during these years of creation and research (i.e. during my PhD at the University of Birmingham), my priority had to be the development of my own ‘personality’ through the means of ‘retrospective sight’ (Klee, 1957: p.45) that could work as the foundation of my work. It was first of all an exploration of my own self with which I decided to deal and, as stated in the introduction, the way I decided to organize this Commentary mirrors the approach I had in this exploration.

In this context, the need for a chapter dedicated to problems that belong to the field of philosophy, aesthetics and perception, has to be seen as the consequence of my belief that, in the process of a research in composition, it is impossible to deal just with the field of music alone as something autonomous and disconnected from everything else.<sup>20</sup> I see the artist – in this case the composer – first of all as an *intellectual* whose need is to have a view of the problems with which he or she wishes to deal that is ‘as global as possible’, and whose stimuli come from the most disparate sources. Although this could sound to many people to be a vaguely old-fashioned position, it is well known that, in dealing with music, one easily ends up studying elements of the history of philosophy and arts, semiotics, hermeneutics and so on. Perhaps because of a vision of culture as a complex net where it is hard to avoid continuous

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<sup>20</sup> Actually I believe that this is true for every single form of art.

links to other new topics and fields, I find it hard to accept the idea of knowing just a few elements of those other fields that are functional to the discourse on music, feeling instead an absolute need to explore them to my best ability. Once again, I need to underline how reductive it would be to consider speculative philosophical works as the only field other than music that influenced the work presented here. Literature and the other arts are key influences in my work and certain very specific aspects of my work are strongly inspired by them, as I attempted to express in the previous chapter.

This kind of description of my work could lead people to think that I consider it more complete than others'. That is not the case. On the contrary, I consider it irreparably incomplete. From a philosophical and musicological point of view, the whole discussion presented in the first chapter can be regarded simply as a core study on the problems of perception of our surroundings, of sound and of music, from which I hope it will be possible to begin to conceive a further research axis. The first field to embrace for a deeper understanding of the questions raised is certainly semiotics, which has points of contact (that I occasionally tried to underline in the text) as well as points of possible contrast with the ideas expressed in chapter one: as the sound images 'mean', 'represent' and 'make sense' it is of fundamental importance to understand how and why this happens and to what extent they can be considered as semiotic signs. Surely, a theory of perception such as the one I discussed, also opens up possibilities of research in the field of neuroscience, especially for that which concerns the relationship between listening and memories, as well as the possible correlation between a perception "by images" as I conceived it (constant framing and exploration) and the way our brain receives and elaborates the information sent by our senses.

As a composer, though, the main field in which I see possibilities for the expansion of that theory is my musical practice. In fact, as I specified several times, in this Commentary I preferred to focus on my own relationship with sound and the complexity of the sound image understood as my personal starting point for the comprehension of *musique concrète*. As I discussed in Chapter 2 I tried already to apply many of the concepts I expressed to my composition, in works which in turn influenced the way I conceived my ideas about sound. The idea of frame and exploration became for me of great importance when it came to try to find personal solutions to formal, technical and aesthetic problems in the various pieces of my portfolio. Perhaps, trying taking so much from other arts and fields when composing, moving too far beyond the boundaries of music, I forced my works, their form and structure as well as their expressive modes, towards something that is not properly ‘musical’. Perhaps it could be said that I partially betrayed music. But this betrayal is not completely ascribable to me: I see it as an intrinsic consequence of a genre that exists on the boundary between several worlds – Schaeffer’s *Traité* is necessarily an *essai interdisciplines* not ‘interdisciplinaire’. Sound on a fixed medium is a unique means of creation and expression that, because of its own nature, crosses dimensions and classifications: it is not a coincidence that nowadays we see so many different fields, genres or aesthetic approaches (e.g. radio works, sound art, soundscapes, experimental music, sound design, etc.) all based on it or at least using it to a great extent, all similar, yet all detached from each other. Sound images and the meta-spaces that we are able to construct through them are, because of their very ontology, a real link between music and the other arts, and beyond that, between arts and other fields of human reflection and knowledge. Maybe more than other forms of music, I consider *musique concrète* and the arts of sounds on a fixed medium not simply the genres that are the most capable of absorbing from other disciplines and fields, but the ones which offer the best doors of access to those

other domains. In considering concrete composition, I feel that jump towards other worlds to be compulsory.

In creating the spaces and meta-spaces that you see listed as the compositions in the Portfolio that I am submitting, I can say that I tried doing nothing but searching for my own *place*. In other words, those spaces and meta-spaces I created were an attempt at defining my own territory, a bit like the child that is taken by Deleuze and Guattari as the opening example for their discussion on the concept of refrain:

*A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best as he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a [...] center in the heart of chaos.*

(2004: p.343)





## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Buifitazioni**

#### **Text translation**

I consider it almost impossible to translate the text written by Enea. Certainly, such a challenge would need a professional translator and, even then, I would not be sure of the final result. Given the kind of lexicon and the way it is structured, the original text can be considered very baroque and, at the same time, quite experimental. It depicts, through a paradoxical mix of apparent non-sense, forced grammar and archaic adjectives, a few extremely dark scenarios that catch the attention of the listener or reader because of their strong evocative power. I must apologize for the result that I am presenting: I do not think that my attempt does justice to the musicality and weird, disturbing beauty of Enea's work.

Nonetheless, I must say that even for an Italian listener, the spoken parts present in my composition are enjoyable mainly in their musicality: complete comprehension would certainly require several attentive moments of focused listening. I am therefore attaching these translations more from a desire for completeness than for a real need of clarification or explanation of my *Buifitazioni*.

1. *Spaccare emicranie pullulanti cancri egemoni! Economie fantasma dell'acchiappo nocivo addetto congruenze mammifere incassate sul dentro delle colonne di Sansone. Architravi spettro rovinanti poi sopra il sotto umano maneggiando le ferite sghignazzanti prima bave arroganti colonizzatrici di un corpo vagheggiato profetica ambizione cieca; tutto dopo il diluvio.*

1. Smashing migraines proliferating egemonic cancers! Ghost economies of the noxious grasp in charge of the mammalian congruences, recessed into the inside of the columns of Sansons. Spectral architraves collapsing then on the sub-human, handling sneering wounds, arrogant drool colonising a dreamt body, prophetic blind ambition; everything after the flood.

2. *Dalle follie incise in acqueforti penitenziali di Giovanni Battista Piranesi ho contratto lo stimolo dei ponti, i ponti retti dai tiranti delle bolge dei gironi danteschi. Sguinci tra spirali che si avvitano issandosi nella profonda crosta! Contorte posture contratte tra l'abisso e il sospeso porgere cammino vuoto, un su e giù di atrofie d'aria che impedantiscono le ultime gesta d'aborto.*

2. From the follies carved on penitential etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, I earned the stimulus of bridges, *bridges* supported by the tie-rods of the ditches of Dante's circles! Bent in-between spirals, screwed whilst standing out against the deep crust. Contorted, contracted poses between the chasm and the offering of suspended, void routes. An up and down of atrophies made up of air, which make pedantic the last deeds of abortion.

3. *La sutura del miscuglio si addensa in questa moltitudine di soliloqui fissi nel muro! Bocche in schiera sfarfallanti a denti spalancati moltiplicano la sensazione del rumore! Il divorio è ciò che pensano allineando i desideri cannibali, scattando poi come furie eschilee e stanando l'ultimo sospiro per farne cibo. La bocca sopravvissuta, in un sussulto di operai antichi, tentò con la lingua un saluto a pugno chiuso.*

3. The suture of the mixture comes to be dense in this multitude of soliloquies affixed on the wall. Fluttering mouths, deployed and open wide, multiply the sense of noise. Devouring is what they think whilst aligning their cannibal desire, springing then like Aeschylean Furies and driving the last breath out, to make food of it. The survived mouth, in a tremor of ancient labourers, attempted with his tongue a farewell of resistance.

4. *Paralizzare gli eventi, atrofizzati dalla precarietà del genio! Liberati costretti dal genio, infilzati dal genio, illusione del genio portato a favolare le sue capacità che non vede mai, che non tocca mai, ma che gli si manifestano come prodigi cristallizzati nell'ego che tende a castrare l'infinito difetto! Illuminazione del sublime prodursi errore nello sterile campo dell'analitico assetto!*

4. To paralyze events crippled by the uncertainty of the genius. Freed and forced by the genius, pierced by the genius, illusion of the genius taken to fantasize his abilities, which he never sees, he never touches; but which reveal themselves like wonders crystallized in the ego that tends to castrate the infinite deficiency. An enlightenment of the sublime that transforms into mistake, in the sterile field of the analytical structure.

5. *Il giorno della mattanza arrivò, la città fu uncinata ai fianchi, sviscerata e sezionata, dissanguata, il sangue raccolto in sacche da stillare ai porci! Porzioni di coaguli venduti ai saccheggiatori contemporanei, contrabbando della specie da folcloristico giogo. Città d'oltretomba, pallida in punto di morte con una decomposizione all'aria aperta piuttosto accecante: "non donna di provincie ma bordello".*

5. The day of killing arrived, the town was hooked in the sides: gutted and dissected, it bled dry, the blood put into goatskin bags to be given to pigs. Portions of blood clots sold to the contemporary plunderer, contraband of the species from colourful yoke. Town of hereafter, pallid when dying, shining of a blinding decay: "mistress, not of provinces, but of a brothel!"

## APPENDIX 2

### List of sound sources and musical excerpts used in the compositions

#### In *Les dimensions du réel*:

- Excerpts from György Kurtág's *Nimmermehr (Excommunicatio)*, in Kurtág, G. (2006) *Kafka-Fragmente op.24*. München: ECM.
- Excerpt from the video *Carmelo Bene su James Joyce*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=831235Pe3PE>. Accessed on: 10/03/2017

#### In *Distante, sospeso*:

- Excerpts from the Achille Lampo's performance of Mascagni's *Intermezzo* from the *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeiEgdnvybM>. Accessed on: 10/03/17.
- Excerpt from T. S. Eliot's reading of his own *Four quartets*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga8tQrG4ZSw>. Accessed on: 10/03/17.
- Excerpts from Rosa Balistreri's *Buttana di to ma*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEp5LrjDeg>. Accessed on: 10/03/17.
- Excerpt from the video of the conference given by Gilles Deleuze on the act of creation. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OyuMJMrCRw>. Accessed on: 10/03/17.
- Excerpt from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Movie version by Franco Zaffirelli, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arqnoxvtzZ4>. Accessed on: 10/03/17.

**In *Il habit partout*:**

- Excerpt from Pierre Schaeffer's *Solfège de l'objet sonore* (1998).

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